

Models of the Universe – Spring 2003

Talking points for class on 26 April 2003

1) Comment upon these two poems---one from the 19th century and one from the 20th century. Is the great increase in our knowledge of the stars in the 128-year interval between the poems reflected in the poems? “Compare and contrast”

[Keats and Frost were highly educated (mainly self-educated in the case of Frost) with access to the latest knowledge in astronomy. Frost seems to have been quite fond of and well versed in astronomy—a subject touched upon in many of his poems: (Stars; A Star in a Stoneboat; The Star Splitter; Canis Major; On Looking up by Chance at the Constellations; Lost is Heaven; The Literate Farmer and the Planet Venus; Astrometaphysical; The Milky Way is a Cowpath; Some Science Fiction; Why Wait for Science; Take Something Like a Star).]

Bright Star, John Keats -- 1819

Bright star! Would I were steadfast as thou art--
Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night,
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
Like Nature's patient sleepless Eremite,
The moving waters at their priestlike task
Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,
Or gazing on the new soft fallen mask
Of snow upon the mountains and the moors--
No-yet still steadfast, still unchangeable,
Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
Awake forever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever-or else swoon to death.

Choose Something Like a Star, Robert Frost -- 1947

O Star (the fairest one in sight),
We grant your loftiness the right
To some obscurity of cloud --
It will no do to say of night,
Since dark is what brings out your light.
Some mystery becomes the proud.
But to be wholly taciturn
In your reserve is not allowed.
Say something to us we can learn
By heart and when alone repeat.
Say something! And it says ``I burn."
But say with what degree of heat.
Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade.
Use language we can comprehend.
Tell us what elements you blend.
It gives us strangely little aid,
But does tell something in the end.
And steadfast as Keats' Eremite,
Not even stooping from its sphere,
It asks little of us here.
It asks of us a certain height,
So when at times the mob is swayed
To carry praise of blame too far,
We may choose something like a star
To stay our minds on and be staid.

2) The penultimate paragraph of Steven Weinberg's influential book, *The First Three Minutes* contains the statement, "The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless." What are your feelings about this statement?

3) In the last paragraph Weinberg writes:

But if there is no solace to the fruits of our research, there is at least some consolation in the research itself. Men and women are not content to comfort themselves with tales of gods and giants, or to confine their thought to the daily affairs of life; they also build satellites and telescopes and accelerators, and sit at their desks for endless hours working out the meaning of the data they gather. The effort to understand the universe is one of the very few things that lifts human life a little above the level of farce, and gives it some of the grace of tragedy.

What are your feelings about this statement?